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## Can Socialization Influence Identification Levels? Formal and Informal Socialization of Graduate Students and Graduate Assistants

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## **“Can Socialization Influence Identification Levels? Formal and Informal Socialization of Graduate Students and Graduate Assistants”**

Tanna White

### **Introduction**

Every organization has standard expectations for member behavior. Socialization ensures that employees learn the accepted ways of responding to each situation and the expected ways of working with others. Socialization may be formal, taking place during orientation meetings, training sessions, workshops, and with assigned mentors. Informal socialization, conversely, involves off-site meetings and social interactions as well as employees learning by watching their coworkers and supervisors (Cousins, Handfield, Lawson & Petersen, 2006; Mujtaba & Sims, 2006).

An effective socialization process should result with alignment between the values of the employee and the organization (Cable & Parsons, 2001). Alignment between values of the employee and the organization is referred to as organizational identification. Each member will identify with an organization in varying levels. When employees identify strongly with the organization, the attributes they use to define the organization also define themselves, perhaps to the point of personifying the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1995). Identification, then, as a fundamental process of relational development and as a product involving feelings of similarity, belonging, and membership, is integrally related to the socialization process.



The goal of this research is to determine how graduate students and graduate assistants at a Midwestern university are socialized, and whether and how those experiences influence their identification levels with the university. Therefore, an empirical relationship between socialization and identification will be tested in this study. Assistantship status is the main difference examined in this study, as graduate assistants could have higher identification levels because they are employees of the university and are required to maintain full-time status. In a previous pilot study, seven graduate assistants were interviewed to understand their socialization experiences and their identification levels with the university. From that study, it was clear that the students did not participate in many socialization activities, nor did they feel much attachment to the university. This study, therefore, aims to look more specifically at the actual socialization activities graduate students are participating in, and how those activities may shape their identification process.

The results of this study may help researchers construct an integrated theory that links socialization and identification processes more directly. Such a theory would aid in not only understanding how the two processes function together, but also in potentially predicting identification levels of organizational members. In terms of practical significance, this study aims to uncover what socialization events graduate students partake in and if/how this participation affects identification levels. Therefore, academic departments, graduate colleges, and universities can utilize these results to improve their socialization events to appeal to more graduate students and to heighten student



satisfaction. The study will begin with a review of previous literature, and be followed by a discussion of the methods, results, and theoretical and practical implications.

### **Literature Review**

This section will highlight previous research conducted in the communication discipline. It first reviews organizational socialization and identification literature separately, and then concludes with a discussion of socialization's influence on members' organizational identification.

#### *Socialization*

Organizational socialization is a process that concentrates on new members' adjustment and learned behaviors, attitudes, values, knowledge, skills of the organization's culture, and expected behavior needed to participate as an organizational member (Leventhal & Bargal, 2008), in order to fulfill their new roles and to function as an effective member of the organization (Van Maanen, 1976). Van Maanen and Schein (1979) describe organizational socialization as the "process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role" (p. 211).

Organizational socialization is also a process of organizational sense-making in the organization. As a person enters a new organization, he or she tries to make sense of what is explained through social cues and information (Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). Van Maanen and Schein (1979) describe organizational socialization as "a perspective for interpreting one's experiences in a given sphere of the work world" (p. 212).

Socialization is an essential process for both the newcomer and the organization, as it



guarantees the sustainability of the values, culture and norms of the organization, helps the new employee adjust to the new job, and increases the newcomer's commitment to the organization (Cable & Parsons, 2001).

The organizational members try to teach, train, and influence newcomers through different socialization tactics (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Formal and informal socialization is one way used to categorize the specific socialization tactics of an organization. Formal socialization is designed structures created with the intention to communicate the organization's expectations and values, as well as knowledge about the organization (Cousins et al., 2006). Specific formats are involved in formal socialization including teamwork, meetings, conferences, orientations, training, and working with assigned mentors (Cousins et al., 2006; Mujtaba & Sims, 2006). Research has indicated that formal socialization may lead better employee-organization fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001; Hopkins & Hopkins, 1990). Informal socialization is often outside of the physical location of the workplace; this type of socialization includes social events, workshops, off-site meetings, or even casual meals at local restaurants. Informal socialization can increase the level of trust between members and strengthen relationships which have been found to have a positive effect on the transmission of cultural norms (Cousins et al., 2006).

The organizational socialization process has also been divided into three stages: anticipatory stage, people prepare themselves to join; accommodation stage, entering the organization and learning the job; and adaptation stage, which is reached as the employees become full members of the organization. Socialization and training in an



organization have been shown to improve task-mastery, role orientation, affiliation with the work group, and comprehension of the organization as a whole (Leventhal & Bargal, 2008).

### *Theory of Organizational Socialization*

In their theory of organizational socialization, Van Manen and Schein (1979) identified six tactical dimensions of socialization. They proposed that each tactical dimension existed on a bipolar continuum. The six tactical dimensions described were collective (vs. individual), formal (vs. informal), sequential (vs. random), fixed (vs. variable), serial (vs. disjunctive), and investiture (vs. divestiture). These six dimensions form the core of what scholars consider to be organizational socialization (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007). The first tactic of collective (vs. individual) socialization refers to the grouping of newcomers and having them experience common situations, rather than putting each new member through a unique set of experiences. The formal (vs. informal) tactic is described as the practice of purposefully distinguishing newcomers from other organizational members, as opposed to not recognizing them as a distinct group. Sequential (vs. random) socialization refers to planned stages of interaction that help the newcomer adjust to their new job role, instead of allowing the process to happen as it will, without purposeful intervention. The next tactical dimension is fixed (vs. variable) socialization. Fixed socialization provides a specific timetable for role assumptions and knowledge of how long processes will take; while variable socialization does not provide this information. Serial (vs. disjunctive) socialization is a process where an experienced organizational member serves as a mentor



to make sure consistency is maintained, rather than a process where members learn tasks without role models. The final tactical dimension of investiture (vs. divestiture) means the organization engages and assumes the self-identity and personal characteristics of new employees, rather than dismissing their unique attributes (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Saks et al., 2007; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Jones (1986) argues that the six tactics (collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture), unify under the term *institutionalized socialization*. These tactics encourage new members to assume a previously determined role in the organization that maintains the status quo. *Institutionalized socialization* has been found to have a negative correlation with role ambiguity, role conflict, and intentions to quit, and a positive relationship with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational identification, custodial role orientation, and fit perceptions (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Cable & Parsons, 2001; Jones, 1986; & Saks et al., 2007).

Jones (1986) describes *institutionalized socialization* as a pole on the socialization continuum with the other pole being *individualized socialization*. This opposite pole includes individual, informal, random, variable, disjunctive, and divestiture tactics that push newcomers to develop their own roles and challenge the status quo (Jones, 1986). Thus, *individualized socialization* encourages newcomer change and development (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). The individualized tactics are defined more by what they are not; they reflect the absence of something. The tactics of *institutionalized socialization* have been found to be a more structured process of socialization than the tactics of *individualized socialization* (Ashforth & Saks, 1996).



### *Identification*

The concept of identifying with an organization has been termed organizational identification. Organizational identification is a specific form of social identification in which people define themselves in terms of their membership in a particular organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Each member will identify with an organization in varying levels. When an employee identifies strongly with the organization, there is a melding between personal and organizational values (Mael & Ashforth, 1995).

A person's self-concept is composed of a variety of their identities, which may evolve from membership in social groups in groups like race, gender, tenure, and work organizations (Dutton et al., 1994). Employees identify with their organization strongly when their identity in the organization is more salient than any other identity and the characteristics of their self-concept align with the characteristics of the organization.

To understand self-concept, self-categorization must first be expanded upon. People view themselves in terms created by society and then use social comparison to define themselves. In order to compare oneself to another, one must interact with co-workers and forge interpersonal relationships. These interactions provide the necessary information for social comparison, which then leads to categorization (Scott, 2007). Self-categorization is a process of comparing the self to others, in order to assign the self as belonging to a group or groups. The people that are categorized as similar to the self are labeled the "in-group" and those who differ as the "out-group." People use demographic characteristics of others for the purposes of categorization (Hogg & Terry, 2000). People





feel the need to categorize others and themselves to reduce uncertainty, to identify themselves and those around them (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The amount of similarities the members of the in-group may have affects on the level of identification. Stereotyped perceptions of in-group and out-group members are enhanced and are made more homogenous by identification with the in-group (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Due to this correlation of self-concept and identification, people are drawn to organizations that allow them to exhibit more of themselves, as humans are self-expressive. Three different studies conducted by Chatman (1991), Chatman & O'Reilly (1986), and Chatman, O'Reilly, & Caldwell (1991) focusing on satisfaction levels and the intent of the employees to stay with the organization. The results suggested that the greater the person-organization fit, the higher the level of intention to stay and the more attitudes and behaviors were consistent with a strong identification level (ctd. in Dutton et al., 1994).

Organizational identification, as experienced by individuals, is defined by feelings of similarity, belonging, and membership. Individuals identify with collectives to the extent that they feel similar to other members, experience a sense of belonging, and consider themselves to be members. Identification, then, as a fundamental process of relational development and as a product involving feelings of similarity, belonging, and membership, is integrally related to the socialization process.

#### *Socialization and Identification*

An effective socialization process should result in a successful alignment between the values of the employee and organization, which is a defining characteristic of



identification (Cable & Parsons, 2001). It has been argued that a more formal socialization process may strengthen this value alignment (Cable & Parsons, 2001; Hopkins & Hopkins, 1990). Low value congruence between the employee and the organization has resulted in increased reports of discomfort, interpersonal conflict, and intention to quit (Kraimer, 1997; Mujtaba & Sims, 2006). “The individual’s work values must match the organization’s work values in order for knowledge acquisition to lead to positive attitudes and behaviors” (Kraimer, 1997, p. 442). Eventually, most newcomers become committed to, integrated into, and/or identified with the organization (Van Maanen, 1976).

Socialization strengthens member identification through the communication of the organization’s defining features, including its norms, values, and culture. Communication creates a shared interpretive context among organizational members. Shared meaning, in turn, provides organization members with a clear sense of the organization’s identity and mission, which could ultimately strengthen member identification. Identification, as its own process, also creates opportunities for organizational learning through the communication of norms and beliefs (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999) that ultimately guide employee actions (Vaughn, 1997). Huff, Sproull, and Kiesler (1989) suggest that if individuals are made to feel that they are active participants in the organization through frequent communication, they will achieve a higher level of identification with the organization (ctd. in Wiesenfeld et al., 1999). The simple public act of participating in the culture during socialization, without being coerced to do so,



may lead individuals to identify themselves with the organization more strongly (Wiesenfeld et al., 1999).

Much of the previous research on the socialization process and its effects of organizational identification levels have been done from a quantitative standpoint. However, one study conducted by Bullis and Bach (1989) looked at the relationship between socialization and identification from a qualitative longitudinal standpoint using the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT). RIT asks the participants to identify and plot turning points in their relationship, in this case, with their academic department. Bullis and Bach (1989) analyzed the socialization experiences of 28 entering graduate students in three communication departments through two interviews. The first interview was conducted approximately 4 months into the year and the second three weeks before the end of the school year. After analysis, the researchers found that receiving informal recognition had the greatest immediate change in organizational identification. Informally socializing with each other also led to higher levels of identification. However, the newcomers in this study were more likely to experience a decrease in identification over time. More than half of the participants reported decreases in identification in the first year. The researchers found that unmet expectations and alienation were the most common reasons for decreases in identification (Bullis & Bach, 1989). This study clearly illustrates a connection between socialization and identification. While recognition and socializing led to higher levels of identification, unmet expectations and feelings of alienation decreased identification. An ineffective and inconsistent socialization process could very well have led to the drop in identification levels.



### *Summary*

Researchers have defined and examined the processes of socialization and identification separately more often than they have studied them together. Of the studies that examine the relationship between the two, a majority were conducted using quantitative methods solely. Not only was Bullis and Bach's (1989) the only qualitative study to connect these processes located during the literature review, it was also the only one that focused on the graduate student population. With more and more students continuing their education into graduate school, it will increasingly become imperative for universities to provide the best graduate experience possible to remain competitive. In order to better understand the socialization of graduate students, not only is more research needed, greater depth is required to examine their experiences more fully. Therefore, this study will be utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a better understanding of the socialization process and assess the resulting identification levels of graduate students and graduate assistants. The researcher felt that it was important to separate the two types of students, because there may be differences in identification based on the full-time, employee status of assistants. In order to uncover this information, the following research questions have been developed for this study:

RQ 1a: Is there a significant difference in the formal socialization between graduate students and graduate assistants?

RQ 1b: Is there a significant difference in the informal socialization between graduate students and graduate assistants?



RQ 2: Is there a significant difference in the identification levels of graduate students and the identification levels of the graduate assistants with the university?

RQ 3a: Is there a significant relationship between formal socialization and organizational identification for graduate students at this university?

RQ 3b: Is there a significant relationship between informal socialization and organizational identification for graduate students at this university?

RQ 4a: What events, if any, changed the way the graduate students feel about their department?

RQ 4b: What events, if any, changed the way the graduate students feel about the university?

## **Methods**

This section will explain how the data was collected and analyzed to further extend previous research by looking at the socialization of graduate students with assistantships, compared to those without assistantships, and whether and/or how this socialization process affects their levels of identification with the university. This section will describe the demographics of the participants that were recruited, and discuss the procedure used to collect the data.

### *Participants*

Graduate students from a public, Midwestern university were recruited using a personalized university web page and a web-based email questionnaire. This web page



allowed students to access all university web resources through a single portal. The participants were sent a message asking for their voluntary participation in a research project which also contained a link to a web-based questionnaire. The questionnaire was created using surveygizmo.com. The same mail list used for the university web page was also used for the email questionnaire and graduate students were sent a link to the web-based questionnaire. By clicking on the link and completing the questionnaire, the participants consented to participate in the study.

The sampling procedure resulted in 224 students participating, or 14% ( $N=1,639$ ) of the population. The sample size was likely affected by the use of the university web page. Students may not check their personalized university web page very often, and/or may not have seen the link to the questionnaire. However, while the sample's percentage of the population was on the low side, the number of respondents ( $n=224$ ) was still useful for analysis. The sample consisted of 20% (44) males and 80% (179) females. Of the participants, 42% (95) held an assistantship position, 67% (150) were considered full-time students, 11% (25) were considered distance learners, and 44% (99) of the participants received their undergraduate degree from the same university. The participants identified belonging to 27 different university departments (see Appendix A).



### *Procedure*

The web-based questionnaire consisted of 22 questions divided into two sections (see Appendix B). The first section contained 9 quantitative and 3 open-ended qualitative questions. The quantitative questions created by the researcher inquired about the awareness and participation of graduate students in formal and informal socialization activities in their departments, the graduate college, and/or the university. Formal socialization processes imply a more task-focused sharing of expectations, knowledge, and information, such as on-site events, meetings, and conferences. Informal socialization tactics are often off-site and are more focused on building interpersonal relationships (Cousins et al., 2006). Based upon previous research (e.g., Cousins et al., 2006; Mujtaba & Sims, 2006) and the goal of the event (i.e., social, educational), this study identified formal socialization as including orientations, meetings, training, on-campus events, and symposia. Informal socialization included workshops, off-campus events, lectures, athletic events, concerts, theater, and speakers. Participants were asked to identify socialization events sponsored by their department and the Graduate College and/or university that they were aware of and ones they attended. The closed-ended questions in the first half of the questionnaire had a relatively high reliability, especially for a created questionnaire (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.83$ ).

Two open-ended questions asked the participants to identify and explain what, if any, of the department, Graduate College, or university-sponsored events changed how they felt about their department, the Graduate College, or the university. The final



qualitative question asked participants what types of activities they engaged in with other graduate students. Formal socialization activities were considered to be structured and organization-centered, such as meetings and orientations. Informal socialization, on the other hand, could be structured (e.g., departmental picnics) or unstructured (spontaneous get-togethers at restaurants), but were student-centered in nature. Both formal and informal events mentioned by participants provided insight into the types of activities that graduate students make time for and enjoy. At the very end of the survey, the participants were asked to provide additional comments if they desired. These comments were also analyzed for themes. Incorporating qualitative questions was seen as essential by the researcher in order to understand what socialization events the graduate students felt were effective and what events they partake in with other graduate students. This information can hopefully help graduate colleges and universities better evaluate their socialization processes and improve the graduate student experience.

The second half of the questionnaire consisted of 15 questions adapted from Cheney's (1983) Organizational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ) and eight demographic and descriptive questions. The OIQ was utilized in order to assess student identification levels with the university. Cheney's OIQ was designed to reflect certain components of organizational identification: membership, loyalty, and similarity. The original questionnaire contained 30 items, but it has since been adapted by other researchers (Potvin, 1992). The improved version of Cheney's OIQ by Potvin (1992) contains 25 items: 5 items inquiring about membership, 9 items relating to loyalty, and 11 items indicating similarity. Potvin's (1992) revised version of the OIQ was scored on a 7-





point Likert scale ranging from very strong agreement (7) to very strong disagreement (1).

The OIQ is one of the most commonly used instruments because it is easy to use and is generally consistent. The internal reliability of the questionnaire has been consistently reported to be high: a Cronbach's alpha of .94 was reported by Cheney (1983) and an alpha of .96 was reported by Potvin (1992). Potvin (1992) also compared the OIQ with four different commitment instruments and the alpha was reported higher for the OIQ than for the other instruments. The composite score of the OIQ was also proven to have a high Pearson correlation with composite scores for instruments that measure organizational commitment (Potvin, 1992).

The version of the OIQ used in this study consisted of 15 questions taken from 25-item version of the OIQ and used a 4-point Likert scale (strongly agree (1), agree (2), disagree (3), strongly disagree (4)). A four point Likert scale was used rather than the seven point Likert scale from Cheney's original OIQ, because for the data to provide insight the respondents needed to answer one way or the other. Furthermore, the response format needed to be simple and quick enough to retain participants. Certain questions were eliminated from the questionnaire because they were not applicable to academia and only appropriate in a business setting. Both Cheney (1983) and Potvin (1992) expressed that the OIQ could be shortened without damage; therefore, the validity and reliability of the OIQ were not sacrificed by adapting the questionnaire. In fact, the reliability in this study was proven to be relatively high with a Cronbach's alpha of .82.



The questionnaire ended with eight demographic and descriptive questions. These questions included sex, assistantship status, assistantship type, receipt of undergraduate degree from the same university, year of undergraduate degree, semester in graduate program, full-time or part-time student, distance or on-campus learner, and department.

### *Data Analysis*

All statistical tests were run in SPSS 15 for Windows. Research questions 1a, 1b, and 2 were all tested using Independent Sample t-tests in order to determine a significant difference between graduate students and graduate assistants in their formal and informal socialization, as well as their identification levels. Research questions 3a and 3b utilized a correlation analysis to determine if there was a relationship between formal socialization, informal socialization, and identification. Thematic analysis was implemented to answer research questions 4a and 4b. Qualitative responses were combed for themes and specific events in order to identify preferred socialization events. The results of the tests and analysis will be discussed in the next section.

### **Results**

In this section, the results of the statistical testing and thematic analysis of the questionnaire data will be presented. Results will be conveyed in order of research questions. Each research question will be reintroduced, the tests used to answer each question will be acknowledged, and the results will be identified.

Research question 1a inquired into the difference in participation in formal socialization between graduate students and graduate assistants. There was not a



significant difference indicated between graduate students ( $M = 1.97$ ,  $SD = 2.33$ ) and graduate assistants ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ) on their participation in formal socialization (see Table 1). The Levene's test for equality of variances was not significant ( $F=.297$ ,  $p=.586$ ) so equal variances were assumed,  $t(221) = .877$ ,  $p > .05$ . The effect size was calculated in order to determine the magnitude of the difference (Cohen's  $d = .12$ ,  $r$  values = .06). The resultant effect size indicated a minor difference between graduate students and graduate assistants in their participation in formal socialization. This  $r$  value suggests that only 0.4% of the variability in formal socialization was accounted for by the assistantship status of the participant. There doesn't seem to be much, if any, difference in the amount of socialization activities participated in between graduate students and graduate assistants.

*Table 1*

	<b>Graduate Students</b>	<b>Graduate Assist.</b>	<b>t-value</b>
Formal Socialization	1.97 ( $SD=2.33$ )	2.23 ( $SD=2.04$ )	.877

Research question 1b examined the difference between graduate students ( $M=3.13$ ,  $SD=2.88$ ) and graduate assistants ( $M=3.38$ ,  $SD =2.76$ ) on their participation in informal socialization by also utilizing an Independent Samples t-test (see Table 2). The Levene's test for equality of variances was not significant ( $F=.004$ ,  $p > .05$ ) so equality of variances is assumed,  $t(221) = .662$ ,  $p > .05$ . The effect size was calculated in order to more closely investigate any difference (Cohen's  $d = .09$ ,  $r$  value = .04). The effect size found for the participation in informal socialization shows a minimal difference between



the two groups of graduate students. The  $r$  value discovered suggests that only 0.2% of the difference in informal socialization participation was accounted for by the assistantship status of the student. These results suggest that graduate students and graduate assistants also participated in about the same amount of informal socialization events.

*Table 2*

	<b>Graduate Students</b>	<b>Graduate Assist.</b>	<b>t-value</b>
Informal Socialization	3.13 ( $SD=2.88$ )	3.38 ( $SD=2.76$ )	.662

Research question two inquired into the difference in organizational identification scores between graduate students ( $M=33.48$ ,  $SD=6.67$ ) and graduate assistants ( $M=31.33$ ,  $SD=5.65$ ). In order to assess the difference in the participants' scores, they were tested using an Independent Samples t-test (see Table 3). The Levene's test for equality of variances was not significant ( $F=2.57$ ,  $p > .05$ ) so equality of variances were assumed,  $t(221) = -2.55$ ,  $p > .05$ . Although the t-test indicated no significant difference between the two groups, effect sized was calculated to more accurately identify the difference (Cohen's  $d = -.35$ ,  $r = -.17$ ). The effect size was calculated to be between small and medium, while the  $r$  value indicates that 3% of the variance in the participants' organizational identification scores can be attributed to assistantship status. Graduate students and graduate students again had very similar scores. If there is a difference in identification levels between graduate students and graduate assistants, it would be a very



slight difference. Not only did they have similar scores, but the average of these scores are considered to be low identification levels (High=  $\geq 47$ , Medium= 46-38, Low  $\leq 37$ ).

*Table 3*

	<b>Graduate Students</b>	<b>Graduate Assist.</b>	<b>t-value</b>
Identification	33.48 (SD=6.67)	31.33 (SD=5.65)	-2.55

Research questions 3a and 3b aimed at determining if there was a relationship between formal socialization and identification and if there was a relationship between informal socialization and identification. To test this relationship a correlation was run with multiple factors, including sex, full-time or part-time status, distance learner status, receipt of undergraduate degree at the same university or not, semester in graduate program, formal socialization, informal socialization, identification, assistantship status, and type of assistantship. There was not a significant relationship found between formal socialization and identification ( $r(224) = -.81, p > .05$ ) or between informal socialization and identification ( $r(224) = -.122, p > .05$ ).

However, significant findings from this analysis were found with many of the other factors (formal and informal socialization, assistantship status, receipt of undergraduate degree at same university, and distance learner status) and identification (see Table 4). The correlation indicated a significant relationship between the total number of formal socialization events participated in and the total number of informal socialization events participated in by the graduate students,  $r(224) = .605, p = .0005$ . These findings show a moderately strong, positive relationship between participation in



formal socialization events and participation in informal socialization events. In other words, all graduate students that participated in formal socialization activities were also more likely to participate in more informal socialization activities, and vice versa. A significant relationship was identified between assistantship status (having one or not) and identification levels of the graduate students,  $r(224) = .169, p < .05$ . The results show a somewhat weak, positive relationship between assistantship status and identification which indicates that assistantship status could possibly affect the graduate students' identification levels even though the t-test showed no significant difference between the identification levels of graduate students and graduate assistants. Another significant relationship was found between graduate students who had or had not received their undergraduate degrees from the same university and their quantified identification levels,  $r(224) = .307, p = .0005$ . This finding indicates a weak to moderate relationship between the two, which seems logical because they would have already spent four years at the same university. The final significant relationship identified by the correlation was between whether or not the graduate students took the majority of their classes via distance learning or not and their identification levels,  $r(224) = .145, p < .05$ . A weak, positive relationship exists between taking classes through distance learning and university identification levels. This relationship seems to indicate that graduate students that take the majority of their classes via distance learning actually have higher identification levels with the university. Distance learners had an average identification score of 30.5, while on-campus learning students had an average identification score of 25.9.

*Table 4*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>N</b>
1. Assistantship Status	1.57	.496	224
2. Undergraduate	1.56	.50	224
3. Distance Learner	1.88	.322	224
4. Total # of Formal Socialization	2.08	2.21	224
5. Total # of Informal Socialization	3.24	2.82	224
6. Identification	32.42	6.69	224

Research questions 4a and 4b inquired whether and how participation in socialization activities influenced graduate student feelings toward the department and university. These questions were answered by thematically analyzing the respondents' responses to three qualitative questions, plus their comments at the end of the questionnaire. To address research question 4a, participants were asked if any of the department socialization activities changed how they felt about their department, which event(s), and for them to explain their response. It is important to point out that 84% of respondents (188) indicated that participation in a specific department event did not change how they felt toward their department. The remaining 16% of participants (36) who did feel that participation in a specific event changed their feelings toward their department identified several formal and informal department-sponsored events. Formal



events identified included individual meetings with advisors and faculty members, group orientation, recognition, professional conferences, and symposia. Informal events mentioned were such things as workshops, picnics, barbeques, social gatherings at professors' houses, dinners, and "get-to-knows."

Overall, this group of participants explained that after attending a specific event they felt more connected to their classmates, coworkers, faculty, and department, felt more a part of the group, and had more knowledge about their department. One participant explained that attending a department-sponsored event made the department feel "more accessible and friendly." Another graduate student described how an experience at a department event helped to "understand how we all fit in the university." A graduate student even specifically commented that the event provided "a greater understanding of the program expectations." One participant "learned how easy it was to interact with faculty." This participant's experience, however, seemed to be different from another student's, who stated that there was low faculty turnout at a certain event. The participant explained how this was very disappointing. One participant stated that there needed to be more consistency in departmental event offerings: "I would like to have more events throughout the year as the only off-campus event was at the beginning of the year and it would be nice to see my professors and fellow cohort members in a different setting." Empirically this sentiment may be accurate, as most events that students said they attended were mainly held at the beginning of the school year, like orientations and meetings with advisors. Overall, the group of participants who identified an event as changing their feelings about their department had mostly positive comments





about their experiences. For these few individuals, involvement in a department-sponsored event can be summed up by one participant's description: "I felt that the department cared about my growth in the department."

Research question 4b asked if there were any graduate college- or university-sponsored events that changed how they felt about the university, for them to identify the event, and explain their response. Again the majority of participants, 89% (200), did not identify a specific event(s) as changing how they felt about the university. Only 11% (24) participants identified that a specific event changed how they felt about the university. Formal events included the New Graduate Student Orientation and attendance at graduate student organization meetings. The orientation was specifically described as, "encouraging me to participate in more activities to meet more graduate students." Another participant described the experience at the orientation by stating, "It was nice to get information on other services, but it would have been nice to meet other students outside of my program." Informal events that were identified were hockey night, pumpkin carving, athletic events, workshops, concerts, theatrical events, and speakers. Hockey night and pumpkin carving, in particular, were identified by one participant as great opportunities for meeting new people. Workshops were notable for broadening student perceptions. One participant explained, "Attending workshops gave me the impression that the Graduate College is concerned about the total development of students." Another participant noted: "I feel pretty disconnected from other grad students, other than those in my cohort. Attending this workshop at least helped me realize that the students are here."



Of the nine events identified by this group of participants, five of the events were graduate-college sponsored, while four were university-sponsored events. A few participants who described these activities alluded to wanting a higher quality and/or frequency of events. They expressed a feeling of disconnection and a desire to meet/socialize with other graduate students and faculty. Overall, however, the participants who identified a specific event felt that attendance at these events made them feel more integrated with the graduate student population and connected to the rest of the university. In fact, one participant “felt more connected to the university and identified as a Panther” during those events.

### **Discussion**

This study explored the amount of participation of graduate students and graduate assistants in formal and informal socialization events and their identification with the university. Establishing a relationship between socialization and identification was another goal of the study. The findings did not reveal a significant difference in the participation of graduate students and graduate assistants in formal and informal socialization events or their identification levels. A relationship between socialization and identification could not be confidently established through the correlation. However, other factors were found to be correlated with identification and the analysis of participants’ comments allow for better understanding of these processes. The discussion will begin with an explanation of the findings, followed by theoretical and practical implications of the study. Future directions for research will complete the section.

### *Findings*



Answers to research questions 1a and 1b revealed that graduate students and graduate assistants participate in about the same amount of socialization events. There was no difference found between the two groups. In addition, no difference was found between the identification levels of graduate students and graduate assistants when research question 2 was tested. These results are somewhat surprising, because graduate assistants are employees of the university and are required to maintain full-time status. Based on the fact that assistants have a greater involvement with the university, one would assume that identification levels would be higher for these students.

When research questions 3a and 3b were tested, no relationship was found between identification and either form of socialization. However, factors that were found to have positive relationships with identification levels included assistantship status, receipt of undergraduate degree from the same university, and distance learner status. Even though no difference was found between the identification levels of graduate students and graduate assistants in this study, a relationship was identified between assistantship status and identification. In sum, this result does not provide definitive answers about the possibility of a relationship between socialization and identification.

Clearer answers can be taken from the relationship of identification to distance learner status and receiving an undergraduate degree at the same university. Distance learning status surprisingly led to higher identification levels for the participants in this study. Even though distance learning students would spend little to no time on campus, they still reported a higher average identification level than on-campus students. This



finding could possibly be explained Bullis & Bach's (1989) study. They found that low identifiers experienced a sense of disillusionment during graduate school. It stands to reason that a lack of disillusionment, then, would result in higher identification levels. Distance learners would spend less time on campus and participate less in events, which may reduce their expectations and therefore leave them less disappointed.

While the distance learning finding is surprising, the positive relationship between identification and receiving an undergraduate degree at the same institution is quite logical. While working toward an undergraduate degree, one would have to spend at least 3 years at that university and already be a member of the university community. Students attending the same university for graduate school would most likely have higher identification levels compared to others who received their undergraduate degree elsewhere. This result highlights a need for departments and the graduate college to focus to pay special attention to graduate students coming from other universities in order to better acquaint them with the university.

A final relationship emerged through the correlation between participation in formal and informal socialization events. This result explained that someone who participated in formal events would be more likely to participate in informal events, and vice versa. Again, this seems to be a fairly obvious relationship. If students are willing to attend one type of event, they would also be more willing to attend other events. It seems that if departments or the Graduate College can encourage graduate students to participate in any one event, participation would be increased at other events. Once students take that first step in participating, they will feel less nervous because they will



have a better understanding of how things work and what to expect. It may be easier to persuade graduate students to attend these events if there is a better understanding of the events that draw participation, based on perceived benefits.

Through analysis of participant responses, research questions 4a and 4b uncovered several events that were identified as being beneficial to the students' relationship with their departments and/or the Graduate College and the university. Department events that participants identified as changing how they felt toward their department included individual meetings with advisors and faculty members, group orientation, recognition, professional conferences, symposia, workshops, picnics, barbeques, social gatherings at professors' houses, dinners, and "get-to-knows". Participants who identified these events explained that they felt more connected with and welcomed to the program.

Participants also implied a desire for more and/or higher quality social interaction with fellow graduate students and faculty. The graduate students felt that getting to know fellow students and faculty would make them feel more comfortable and satisfied with the department. Some participants expressed disappointment with faculty turnout at department events and frequency of events throughout the year. This finding indicates that student needs for inclusion and relational satisfaction are not being met. Therefore, it is imperative that departments not only provide socialization events at the beginning of the year but also throughout the year. Whether these events are formal or informal does not seem to matter. Faculty participation, however, is essential to show the graduate students that faculty is available and interested in them.



Graduate College- and university-sponsored events that were identified as influencing students' feelings toward the university included the New Graduate Student Orientation, attendance at graduate student organization meetings, hockey night, pumpkin carving, athletic events, workshops, concerts, theatrical events, and speakers. Many of the events identified were informal and/or social in nature, implying that graduate students found those activities to be more beneficial and/or enticing. These events might better meet the needs for inclusion and socializing than other events precisely because they are less structured. Students may have more time to get to know other graduate students at informal gatherings. Graduate students identified a desire to get to know graduate students from other departments and to feel more like a part of the university. They explained that participation in these events made them feel connected with the rest of the university, if only for the duration of the event. This expressed need to feel a part of the broader university could be accomplished by hosting cross-departmental events. Some participants in this study commented that it was hard to connect with graduate students in other departments and that they were not aware of a lot of the events offered on-campus. It is unclear why the participants were unaware of events, but in order to increase graduate student participation, using more or different avenues of promotion will become essential.

Participants were also asked to identify what type of activities that they participated in with fellow graduate students. This information was examined to provide a better understanding of the events that graduate students make time for and enjoy, in hopes of determining which activities are the most attractive to them. Participants



identified mainly informal activities, from sharing meals, going to bars or parties, to attending sporting, theatrical, and musical events. Some students like to shop, work out, go to church, or study together. They use social networking via Facebook to stay in touch. More formalized activities that were mentioned focused on conferences, workshops, and training events that were specific to the student's major. Participants seemed to prefer informal events, likely because these events help students bond, creating a sense of belonging. The inclusion need is difficult to meet at the graduate level because students have more homework responsibilities and fewer opportunities to meet students from other departments than undergraduates. Feeling isolated from the rest of the university could be contributing to low identification levels. For graduate students to have improved satisfaction with their graduate programs and heightened attachment to their university, they need more opportunities for socializing with students and faculty within and outside their departments. Focusing attention on improving the graduate student experience will also help improve recruitment and retention at the graduate level.

#### *Theoretical Implications*

Similar to Bullis and Bach (1989), this study found that alienation and unmet expectations may decrease identification while recognition and socializing may increase identification levels. However, unlike Bullis and Bach (1989), this study was unable to establish a link between socialization and identification even though previous research has shown a relationship between the two processes (Cable & Parsons, 2001; Hopkins & Hopkins, 1990). Perhaps in this study a link could not be made, not because socialization had no influence, but rather because it was ineffective in this organization. The fact that



distance learners, who had little to no participation in formalized socialization efforts, and yet had higher identification levels than on-campus learners, is telling. Basically, when a socialization process is faulty, the more members are immersed in the process, the more damaging it is to their identification levels.

The results of this study, taken with previous research, could contribute to a new conceptual framework that clearly links the two processes. An integrated theory could better explain the intuitive relationship between the quality of the socialization process and resultant levels of organizational identification. Researchers could continue to identify specific socializing activities, as was done in this study, that lead to positive or negative swings in identification levels for newcomers.

#### *Practical Implications*

This study has provided much needed insight into the socialization experiences of graduate students at a university. Academic departments, graduate colleges, and/or universities could utilize these results to provide more informal events to increase participation. Departments need to also increase the frequency of socialization events throughout the year, as well as encourage more faculty participation.

Heightened student awareness of these events will also be essential to increase participation. Several participants described not being aware of many of the events offered to them, especially Graduate College-sponsored ones. Perhaps using student-centered technologies like Facebook to announce events would increase awareness. Utilizing multiple channels of advertising, including engaging in casual conversations with the graduate student population, will improve awareness.





Another reason for lack of attendance may be the graduate students' focused dedication to their studies. While this single-mindedness in purpose is perhaps necessary to earn a degree, the human needs to belong and relate to others still have to be met. Given the unique, pressure-filled demands of graduate school, having opportunities to bond with others going through the same process may be especially important. Increased participation at events would hopefully fulfill the graduate students' needs for inclusion and socializing, thus improving their overall satisfaction with their program. A high-quality, effective socialization process should lead to students feeling positive about their program, which in turn, should increase their identification levels (Dutton et al., 1994). When identification levels are high, students can better establish the relationships with others they so greatly desire to create. Even as the results of this study are specific to a single graduate program, there are likely to be patterns of similarity that exist in other universities. It is hoped that this practical information will be helpful for universities trying to create a supportive, interactive, and satisfying graduate program for its students.

#### *Future Directions*

Future studies should strive for a greater diversity of participants than in the present study. Certain demographic information (age, marital status, time spent on campus, and international student status) could provide more insight into event participation. If students have families, for example, their identification levels could be quite different from students who are single or childless. Time spent on campus could provide more insight into opportunity for participation in socialization events. International student status could possibly influence identification levels based on



cultural differences. Future studies should also better balance participation by men and women. Participants in this study included 44 males and 179 females; a more balanced participation could alter the results. Another avenue for future research would be to consider whether participation in one type of socialization has a greater influence on identification levels than another. Finally, a qualitative, possibly longitudinal, study would allow the participants to tell their own story, and make their own connections between the two processes. A truly rich description of the first-hand experiences of socialization and identification would contribute greatly to the current body of research.

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## Appendix A

### Participants by Department

<b>Department</b>	<b># of Participants</b>
Accounting	2
Art	1
Biology	5
Chemistry & Biochemistry	1
Communication Studies	19
Communication Sciences & Disorders	444
Computer Science	1
Curriculum & Instruction	12
Earth Science	1
Educational Leadership, Counseling, & Post-Secondary Education	37
English Language & Literature	10
Geography	2
Health, Physical Education, & Leisure Services	21
History	6
Management	5
Mathematics	7

Modern Languages	6
Music	14
Physics	2
Political Science	5
Psychology	12
Social Work	4
Sociology, Anthropology, & Criminology	7
Special Education	13
Teaching	3
Other	11

## Appendix B

### Socialization and Identification Questionnaire

The purpose of this survey is to discover the socialization processes of graduate students at the University of Northern Iowa and their identification levels with their department and the university. This survey is part of a graduate student research paper and possible future studies; it is in no way connected to university administration. The interest for this paper is to better understand the relationship between graduate students and the university. The survey consists of 22 short questions about your socialization experiences and identification level. It should take you no longer than 15 minutes to complete the survey. Risks to participation are similar to those experienced in day-to-day life, however if you feel uncomfortable at any time you may discontinue participation without any penalty. In order to participate you must be a graduate

student at the University of Northern Iowa and you must be at least 18 years of age. Your participation is voluntary and refusal to participate will in no way penalize you. Please note that this survey is confidential. If you have any further questions, please contact the researcher via telephone at (712) 420-9923 or by email at [tmwhite@uni.edu](mailto:tmwhite@uni.edu), the paper advisor Dr. Jayne Witte at (319) 273-2680 or [jayne.witte@uni.edu](mailto:jayne.witte@uni.edu), or the office of IRB Administration at (319) 273-6148. Thank you for your time and participation!

1. Check all of the following activities that you are aware that your department offers.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group Orientation            | <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Orientation       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group Meetings               | <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Meetings          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group Training               | <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Training          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Workshops                    | <input type="checkbox"/> On-campus Social Activities  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Off-campus Social Activities | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please Specify) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> None                         |   |

2. If your department offers any of the above mentioned activities, please check all of the activities that you have attended.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group Orientation            | <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Orientation       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group Meetings               | <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Meetings          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group Training               | <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Training          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Workshops                    | <input type="checkbox"/> On-campus Social Activities  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Off-campus Social Activities | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please Specify) _____ |



☐ None

3. Did participation in a specific event sponsored by your department change how you felt about the department?

☐ Yes    ☐ No

4. What was the event(s)? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

5. Check all of the following activities sponsored by the Graduate College that you were aware were offered.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brown bag Lectures               | <input type="checkbox"/> Workshops  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> New Graduate Student Orientation | <input type="checkbox"/> On-campus Social Activities  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Off-campus Social Activities     | <input type="checkbox"/> Service Projects (Salvation Army/food drive)   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Career Services                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Graduate Student Organizations<br>(Graduate Student Social Network,<br>Graduate Student Association of<br>Polyglots) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Research Symposium               | <input type="checkbox"/> Training   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> None                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please Specify) _____   |

6. Check all of the following Graduate College sponsored events that you have attended.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brown bag Lectures               | <input type="checkbox"/> Workshops                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> New Graduate Student Orientation | <input type="checkbox"/> On-campus Social Activities            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Off-campus Social Activities     | <input type="checkbox"/> Service Projects                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Career Services                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Graduate Student Organization Meetings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Research Symposium               | <input type="checkbox"/> Training                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> None                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please Specify) _____           |

7. Check all of the following university events that you were aware were available.

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Athletic Events | <input type="checkbox"/> Concerts |
|--|-----------------------------------|

☐ Theater

☐ Speakers

☐ Workshops

☐ UNI Museum

☐ Wellness Center

☐ Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

8. Check all of the following university events that you have attended.

☐ Athletic Events

☐ Concerts

☐ Theater

☐ Speakers

☐ Workshops

☐ UNI Museum

☐ Wellness Center

☐ Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

9. Did participation in a specific Graduate College or university sponsored event change how you felt about the university as a whole?

☐ Yes    ☐ No

10. What was the event(s)? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

11. How often do you attend social events with other graduate students not sponsored by your department, the Graduate College or the university in a month?

☐ 0 times    ☐ 1-2 times    ☐ 3-4 times    ☐ 5-6 times    ☐ 7+ times

12. What kind of events are they? Explain.

---

---

---

13. Please check the box to the left of the answer that most closely reflects your opinion.

I am very proud to be a student at UNI.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

UNI's image in the community represents me as well.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

I often describe myself to others by saying, "I am a student at UNI" or "I am from UNI".

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

We at UNI are different than students at other universities.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

I am glad I chose to go to UNI rather than another university.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

I talk up UNI to my friends as a great school to attend.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

I become irritated when I hear others criticize UNI.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

I have warm feelings toward UNI.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

I feel that UNI cares about me.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

I have a lot in common with others who attend UNI.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

My association with UNI is only a small part of who I am.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

I find that my values and the values of UNI are very similar.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

I feel very little loyalty to UNI.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

I would describe UNI as a large “family” in which most members feel a sense of belonging.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

I find it easy to identify with UNI.

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

Please check the box that corresponds to your response.

14. What is your sex?                      ☐ Male                      ☐ Female

15. Do you have an assistantship?                      ☐ Yes                      ☐ No

If so, what kind?

☐ Teaching   ☐ Research   ☐ Work   ☐ Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

16. Did you receive your undergraduate degree from UNI?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

17. In what year did you receive your undergraduate degree? \_\_\_\_\_

18. What semester are you in your graduate program?

☐ 1<sup>st</sup>    ☐ 2<sup>nd</sup>    ☐ 3<sup>rd</sup>    ☐ 4<sup>th</sup>    ☐ 5<sup>th</sup>    ☐ 6<sup>th</sup>    ☐ Other

19. Are you a full-time student or a part-time student? ☐ Full-time ☐ Part-time

20. Do you take your classes via distance learning? ☐ Yes ☐ No

21. Please specify your department. \_\_\_\_\_

22. Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time and participation!